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SUMMER 2014

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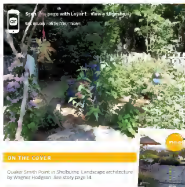
In this Summer issue of **Nest**, we're thinking about **outdoor living**. Vermont's climate gives us precious few months to do so, but we make the most of it. Go ahead and draft a little over the cover photo and more inside, from Burlington

landscape architects Wagner Hodgson (page 14). Not all of us have a stunning mountain view or sprawling property, but, as H. Keith Wagner and Jeff Hodgson tell us, changing where the goal is to create an intimate moment no matter where you live.

We recommend settling into a chair and perusing this issue, whether you'll learn about an **enterprising contractor** (page 4) in Burlington and an **emerging upholder** (page 8) in Shrewsbury, read about some **commercial real estate** (page 10) guys who know from office space, learn about **perennials** (page 10) that are happy in shade, and find out how to spiff up tired furniture with **trendy chalk paint** (page 20).

You'll find a new Nest tucked inside the pages of Seven Days each summer. Tell us what you think.

We asked readers to send us photos of their cool outdoor spaces. This one is Kate Vansucha's yard in Burlington.



ON THE COVER

Quaker Smith Point in Shrewsbury. Landscape architecture by Wagner Hodgson. See story page 14.

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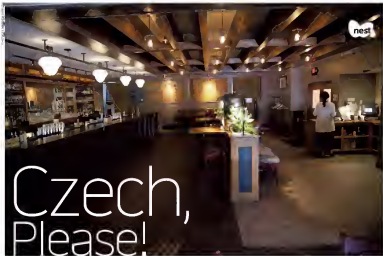
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Czech, Please!

When Vermont restaurateurs want new digs, they order up construction manager Peter Smejkal

BY KEN PICARD

When Peter Smejkal and his wife, Iva, escaped their native Czechoslovakia in 1986, their first meal outside the Iron Curtain was in a McDonald's in Austria. In the ensuing two decades, Smejkal would build and rehab more than 30 McDonald's outlets around the United States. Later, he would help Vermont restaurateurs convert a former McDonald's in Burlington into a much finer eatery: the Farmhouse Tap & Grill. >>

T&P: The Guild Tavern
LEFT: Peter Smejkal
McKear Construction LLC, South Burlington 236-3300

The restoring McDonald's theme in Smejkal's life seems fitting. Ray Kroc, the entrepreneur who built the world's most successful fast-food chain, was Czech, notes Smejkal, who's also a self-made businessman. Smejkal came to the United States with no money or English-speaking skills. And, despite the master's degree in construction economics he'd earned in Czechoslovakia, in this country he worked seven days a week at menial jobs just to get his start.

Today Smejkal, 53, owns and operates McKear Construction LLC, a highly successful estimating and construction management firm in South Burlington. McKear Construction may not be a household name around Vermont like the Pizzagalli (of PC Construction) or SD Truitt, but locals who dine out regularly will certainly recognize Smejkal's projects. In addition to the Farmhouse, they include all the Sherry Pinckney eateries, El Cortijo Taqueria y Cantina and New Moon Cafe in Burlington, and the Guild



DESIGN

Timers in South Burlington, to name a few.

So why doesn't Merker have better name recognition? Unlike many contractors, Senechal doesn't advertise or embrace his name across his job sites. As he explains, "It's not about me. It's about the product, the restaurant."

Senechal has a reputation for keeping a low profile, but also a vigilant eye on the bottom line. Even after nearly 30 years in Vermont and obvious financial success — the Senechals own a beautiful home in South Burlington, which he's continually renovating — he hasn't abandoned a new immigrant's work ethic. Senechal for a hobby of fixing up old cars, Senechal says, he doesn't spend much money on himself. His clients confirm that he works seven days a week and never takes vacations or holidays.

"He rarely enjoys the work and is passionate about it," says Sloney Pincus co-owner Benji Adler. "He's so committed to the job. It's not like he's trying to check out at five o'clock."

Adler first learned of Senechal the way most of his clients do — by word of mouth. He hired the contractor for estimating work on the Sloney Pincus's Burlington International Airport project, which he describes as "a beast": three separate locations, two kitchens, and numerous logistical and security challenges.

Nevertheless, Adler was so pleased with Senechal's work that he hired him as his full-time project manager. Later, Senechal handled the Sloney Pincus's expansion on Burlington's waterfront and the "revamp" of its Montpelier restaurant. Adler says he's been very impressed with Senechal's hard work ethic.

"You tell him you want to put in a counter, and he'll say, 'Well, that'll be \$70 a square foot,'" Adler adds. "He knows the full spectrum of products, from cheap to best value to most expensive."

"He creates professional and efficiency," agrees Steve Conant, founder and owner of Conant

Metal & Light in Burlington, who's worked with Senechal on several restaurant projects. "He's extraordinarily knowledgeable about what things cost — and, somehow, he can really get things done."

Though Senechal has done much of his work in Burlington, he actually got started in another "Queen City": Keosauqua, about 90 miles east of Prosser, where he was project manager for a massive waste-recycling facility. In Keosauqua, he explains, architects, designers and builders had to estimate projects "down to the last screw. So when I started here, I guess people noticed I was paying attention to all these details."

Senechal has known his wife, Ira, since they were teenagers. In 1986, the couple decided to flee to the West with their 3-year-old daughter.

I ALWAYS ADVISE THE OWNERS, "DO YOU WANT TO SAVE THE MONEY NOW AND PAY LATER, OR DO YOU WANT TO DO IT RIGHT?"

PETER SENECHAL

"Always say life dreams was to be in the U.S., because of the Constitution and the freedom," Senechal says, speaking with a still-discernible Czech accent.

But leaving his homeland wasn't easy. Hungarian border guards spent more than six hours searching and dismantling the family's car, looking for an excuse not to let them pass. When they didn't find one, Senechal asked the guards, "You're going to put that car back together again, right?" They didn't, so he spent several more hours reassembling it.

Once in Hungary, the Senechals tried heading to Italy but got turned away at another border "by

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Czech, Please!

machine guns," he recalls. Getting into Austria wasn't much easier, as their departure coincided with the massive evictions that followed the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine that same year. Eventually, though, the Seagals arrived in Austria, where they applied for asylum at the U.S. embassy. Friends greeted them in Colorado three months later.

After a few months, another friend invited Seagall to Vermont, describing it as "like Switzerland." Three days later, he was working the night shift at a commercial bakery for \$13.35 an hour. Two friend work in a local nursing home. After a few months, she landed a job at a Burlington area bank, where she's now a vice president.

In 1988, Seagall registered his business, Markon Construction, in Vermont. The name pays tribute to the Czech company that makes kids' toy metal construction sets.

Seagall says his top priorities are to "not make costly mistakes" and to build places that will last. That is especially important for restaurants, he says, whose owners really "hustle up the place" due to constant cleaning and other wear and tear. So, he says, maybe it'll cost an extra \$1,000 to waterproof the walls, but that'll save \$20,000 down the road.

"I always advise the owners, 'Do you want to save the money now and pay later?'" he asks. "or do you want to do it right?"

Seagall describes his career as "a fun job" and has no plans to retire, or even slow down. And, as a naturalized U.S. citizen, he expects anyone on his job site willing to work, even the unsanitized laborer pushing a broom.

"I'm still on my knees every day cleaning," he explains, "because if it needs to be done, I'm doing it." ☐



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Seam in Time

From sofas to sports cars, a Shoreham upholsterer brings back the bounce in the seat

BY KATHRYN FLAGG

Jim Ortuno's unofficial motto is, "If it holds at all long enough, I can upholster it." And it's not much of an exaggeration. The upholsterer's customers have trucked furniture, hot rods and high-end sports cars hundreds of miles to be retooled in his little shop in Shoreham. Ortuno, 59, has also upholstered dollhouse furniture, motorboats, the cockpit of a small airplane and an antique baby buggy.

His trade and craft is about more than just making things look pretty. Ortuno is part structural engineer and part artist, tasked with rebuilding furniture or automobile interiors from the inside out and then, yes, making them look good. His skill has won him fans all over the country, and the waiting time to get an item into his shop sometimes runs two or three months.

Ortuno, a California native, got his start in



Jim Ortuno

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upholstery at 16, working on the shop owned by his high school girlfriend's father. "Cars are king in Los Angeles," Ortuno says—and, fringingly, that business





INTERIORS

WHEN I MOVED HERE, I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO OO TRACTOR SEATS.

JIM ORTIZ

focused solely on auto upholstery. The after-school job turned into a summer gig during college, though Ortiz, a criminology student, didn't intend to make upholstery his life's work.

When he graduated during a hiring freeze and couldn't find a job, he headed back at the upholstery shop in E.A. Semet years later, after opening a second branch of the business in the Sea Ranch area. Ortiz bought out his mentor. He was officially in business, and over the years his auto upholstery shop became so popular that he was booked as much as a year in advance.

Fast forward a few decades, and Ortiz and his wife were ready for a big change. His wife dreamed of owning a bed-and-breakfast, he says, which is how the family ended up moving across the country to Sherborn, Vt. They purchased the Sherborn Inn, at the time a shabby B&B operation, and began updating and refurbishing the 18th-century lodging house.

The couple eventually sold the inn, but stayed in the rural Addison County town with which they had fallen in love.

After moving to Vermont, Ortiz set up his upholstery shop across the alley from the inn and launched out from auto work into furniture upholstery — he says the two are like “apples and oranges.”

“When I moved here, I thought I was going to do tractor seats,” Ortiz jokes. He assumed there wouldn't be enough hot rods and sports cars in the hills of Vermont to sustain his business as it once was.

Then he stumbled across Restoration and Performance Motors, the high-end garage in Vergennes run by father-and-son duo Peter and Steve Markowski. Since Ortiz was doing all the upholstery for the shop, after his work as a 2019 Ferrari coupe started winning awards at local auto shows, his work docket looked up a year in advance.

Ortiz enjoys working on cars in part, he says, because “you get to enjoy someone else's dream.” The upholstery is typically the last piece to fall into place on an often year-long process of refurbishing an old car. “I'm the last guy in the food chain,” he says. The body is polished and sanded up, the engine parts, “the owner has been waiting years to sit in this car, turn the key and drive it down the road,” he adds.



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Ortino and Raymond upholster a car seat.

Stitch in Time

On a recent afternoon, Ortino is at work in his shop reupholstering an old armchair in vintage wool Swiss Army blankets. Close at hand is Eric Raymond, 18, Ortino's apprentice of just a few weeks. Finding someone to train in his trade is difficult, Ortino says. "The first thing they need is patience, patience and more patience."

Ortino typically sees a few different categories of furniture move through his shop, among them family heirlooms and antiques or flea market finds. Occasionally he'll reupholster a brand-new piece of furniture that someone fell in love with but couldn't get in the desired color or fabric. He also sees pieces that might not technically be worth rebuilding and reupholstering, but customers who are sentimentally attached to them bring them in nonetheless.

"The new stuff's all junk," says Ortino of furniture mass-produced today. He advises that yard-sale

household furniture shop-pers keep an eye out for heavy, hard-wood pieces with old springs in the cushions. "If it takes two people to lift a chair up," he says, "you've typically stumbled upon a high-quality piece."

Customers who bring a piece to be reupholstered may expect once-again shock. Material alone can cost Ortino more than a cheap sofa from a big-box store. The good news? "Quality will cost less on the long run."

Pushing 60, Ortino says he plans to continue working for as long as he's able. It's physically demanding work—a point he demonstrates by folding himself into the back of a two-seater Mazda convertible. He spent hours crammed into the tiny space while reupholstering the front seats. To a reporter's incredulous question, "How do you do that?" he responds matter-of-factly, "Years and weight training." ☺

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Office Suppliers

V/T Commercial navigates the space race

BY ETHAN DE SEIFE

The Burlington area is known for its rich arts culture, beautiful natural surroundings .. and seemingly permanent shortage of commercial real estate.

According to the most current report prepared by South Burlington real estate firm Allen & Brasola, the retail vacancy rate for Chittenden County in June this year is just 4.1 percent; the vacancy rate for industrial properties is 5.9 percent. And these figures are actually lower than the 20-year averages for both

categories, a fact that suggests the retail and industrial markets are getting even tighter. (The county's current vacancy rate for office space, 10.6 percent, offers a little more breathing room.)

It can be difficult for the state's economy to grow when physical locations in which to conduct — or launch — a

business are in short supply. Finding the right commercial space in the Burlington area is less about surveying the few available properties and more about making the right connections.

That's why Tony Blake, co-owner and co-founder of Burlington's V/T Commercial real estate brokerage, says that his company's role is one of "matchmaker and facilitator." Since its inception in 1986 — when Blake and co-founder Bill Kneidl decided to get out of the restaurant business and into commercial real estate — V/T Commercial has made it a priority to connect buyers and sellers.

"We're more of a 'people business' than anything," says Kneidl, who notes that many fruitful matches have been made during meetings and cocktail parties. "In a city like Boston, you might be a specialist just in tenant leasing," he adds. "But Vermont is a small state, so we're generalists."

In what he calls a "typical" occurrence for the company, co-owner Jed Doucette says that, seven or eight years

ago, he received a call "out of the blue" from Aurora Software, a company that designs two-reporting management programs. It was looking for a small space.

"I found them 1,000 square feet down on the waterfront," says Doucette. "They stayed there three years, then needed more space, so I put them in 2,300 square feet. Last summer they really needed to grow, so they went into 6,000 square feet — all within Burlington."

Doucette adds, "We're those guys who will ... treat each small company the same way that we'd treat the big companies." Adds Kneidl, "The birds don't bite the big birds."

Sometimes, a move to the opposite direction is required. In downtown, V/T Commercial recently assisted in the Burlington Free Press' move from a 50,000-square-foot space to offices that occupy less than a third of that area. "They were spread out like grandpa's attic," says Kneidl. "They entered our help, and we guided the whole process.



WE'RE THOSE GUYS WHO WILL... TREAT EACH SMALL COMPANY THE SAME WAY THAT WE'LL TREAT THE BIG COMPANIES.

JED DRUSEVICH

We get them into a much more efficient space.

The company brokers real estate transactions of all kinds, representing both those seeking space and those who manage it. Still, Blake estimates that 75 percent of his V/T Commercial business concerns leasing properties rather than buying or selling them. "Leasing creates a much higher degree of flexibility for a corporate tenant," he says. "They don't know what may happen five years from now, and they don't want to be encumbered by owning."

V/T Commercial's client list ranges from small medical companies to restaurants to private practice attorneys to major multinational corporations looking for space for a local outpost. Details of this list (type, for reasons of client confidentiality are often so shrouded in secrecy that says associate Clem Sherman, it can be difficult even to conceive of landlords that the client wants "Those are handled very carefully" he says.

One of the local companies is V/T Commercial's client roster is advertising agency K&N, which has offices in New York City and Boston as well as in Burlington. Located in a 19th-century former warehouse that encompasses about 30,000 square feet near Burlington's lakefront, the company decided to subdivide. After consulting with V/T, K&N opted to keep about 12,000 square feet for its own operations and add the rest to, among other enterprises,

architectural firm Dore & Whitaker. The move significantly increased K&N's overall efficiency, says managing partner Yoram Ben-Zvi.

"We went from operating on three floors to operating now on one," he says. "It was a pretty big shift for us." The partition took, he estimates, at least three years to complete. "Tony and Jeff were great to work with," Shatz says. "We worked together in coming up with a lot of different possibilities for the overall space. They showed great patience, great creativity and great determination."

Startups that want to find big, postindustrial working spaces will have their work cut out for them. Open plan, former warehouse workspaces of the kind that has revitalized Burlington's Pine Street corridor are "getting sparse," says Sherman. "To the best of my knowledge, the Artist Loft complex is full, the Malaise Building is 90 percent plus full and the Innovation Center [the former General Dynamics facility on Lakeside Avenue] is filling up quickly," he adds.

Such properties still exist, but they typically require major renovations to suit the needs of new tenants. A property owner needs a solid commitment from a new tenant before he or she commits funding toward a major rehabilitation, says Sherman.

So what happens when all of the cool old warehouses have been snapped up and turned into "conventional" workspaces? Sherman believes that, because such properties are at a premium right now, local property owners may have the incentive they need to convert their old stock into the kinds of space that appeal to today's young entrepreneurs.

"That is not to say that there isn't a demand and use for the more traditional kinds of space, as well," he adds. "Investment advisors and insurance agencies — the professional, suit-and-tie guys — still need that professional environment with a closed office. There's still a demand for that, and always will be." □

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(SPORTS. CENTER.)



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TOP: Lake Overlook residence,
La Grange Park, IL. Photo
Wagner left, and Jeffrey
Hodgson

LEFT: Wagner and Hodgson
on their studio tour

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Beyond Lawn

*Landscape architects
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BY KIAN CHIANG-WAREN



OUTDOORS

If you've been around northern Vermont in the past 10 years, you've seen the work of El. Keith Wagner and Jeffrey Hodgson. The duo's eponymous Burlington-based landscape-architecture firm has worked on highly trafficked sites such as Jay Peak Resort, the University of Vermont's Dudley H. Davis Center, Dealer.com, Fletcher Allen Health Care, the Winooski rotary, the Shelburne Museum's Pizzagalli Center for Art and Education, and the ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center, to name a few.

The firm also works on residential homes, using a signature modern-but-natural touch. Wagner and Hodgson's aesthetic combines clean, bold lines in natural rock or other landscape material with textured plant drifts. The landscape architects say that every home, regardless of size or location, can be landscaped to maximize its comfort and beauty; they work with accounts that range from \$10,000 to \$1 million. The key in all instances, in their opinion, is to *pare down*.

"The landscape that Jeff and I are trying to create is coloring," Wagner says. "The world is hectic enough. When you come home, it would just be nice to have an odd moment. You just enjoy it. There's not a lot of clutter, nothing's going on. It's just very coloring."

Hodgson and Wagner first turned up 11 years ago, after a mutual architect friend introduced them. They shared a love for natural and native materials, and a similar design sensibility. "That was a good chemistry, so I said, 'Hey, how about we become partners?'" Wagner remembers. That chemistry has clearly survived the years — when we sat down with the two at their Marble Avenue office, they frequently finished each other's sentences.

The work in their portfolio suggests that the word "minimalist" only hints at the combined aesthetic that's earned Wagner and Hodgson its elegant reputation. "It's definitely modern," Wagner allows. "But 'minimalist' kind of indicates that the site would be void of richness. We use stone

walls, plant material, textures and colors that make it feel, give it the warmth. So the materials are all very clean and modern and minimalist, but there's a tactile and a sensory experience because of the richness of materials."

What exactly does a landscape architect do? When it comes to homes, Hodgson and Wagner say, the answer is a little bit of everything: "We're trained in grading and drainage and road layouts," explains Wagner. "We have the skills of a civil engineer, the plant-material skills of a horticulturalist, the structural skills of an architect. And then we have the appreciation for the arts!"

Wagner and Hodgson orchestrate the "big picture" of a site's design, bridging the gap between indoors and outdoors. Trees may be clipped on the grounds to maximize an architectural feature such as large windows, while outdoor living spaces such as log decks or a patio may be landscaped in.

Wagner and Hodgson aim to make the transition seamless from indoors to outdoors. For instance, an interior cement floor might be extended to an outdoor patio floor of the same material, creating a visual cue that the home extends beyond its walls. "It's taking the geometric lines of what the architecture is doing — into the landscape and blurring that line where one ends," Wagner says.

"That was popular out west in the 1940s and '50s," Hodgson adds. "But I think, due to the history in New England and the weather, it's

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Spread the mixture on slices of a Stewart's Bakery baguette, or use as a dip for your favorite fresh vegetables.

Pair with your favorite Sauvignon Blanc. We recommend Le Grand Cailion from the Loire Valley, just \$9.99.

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Seven Shady Natives

Prime perennials for Vermont's climate

BY HANNAH PALMER ROAN

Summer visits to my mom's place inevitably include afternoon wanders through her three-acre property to survey the day's blooms. Her gardens began with two modest plantings in the 1980s and have expanded into a wild collection of hard-to-find perennials.

In recent years, I've noticed more native plants cropping up—hardy, early-flowering varieties that evolved in local forests and are well-adapted to Vermont's rocky, acidic, glacial soil and. These plants are noninvasive, and, once they tend to thrive with minimal maintenance, they're ideal for backyard gardeners who like to keep a pretty spread without devoting tons of time to it. What's more, many Vermont nurseries carry them in abundance.

Reminded by photos, Perennial Measures Nursery owner Rachel Kane says native plants offer bigger-picture benefits. "A great reason to use them," she explains, "is that they're co-evolved with the insects and wildlife here, so they support native populations of pollinators to a degree degree than cultivars."

Kane's East Hardwick nursery offers an array of native plants, many of them bred in gorgeous display gardens that are and inspire.

In Morrisville, Cady's Bell's Nursery specializes in shade-loving plants and offers abundant, walkable gardens. Co-owner Leah Avery says most shade-seeking natives are perfectly happy in any well-drained, organic, humus-rich soil, but cautions that many come from deciduous forests, so they'll do better below hardwood tree canopies.

Because they come from broad-leaf forests, many of these dainty forest bloomers in the light of early spring, before the leaves grow in. In the garden, they give you a flash of cooler, basking warmer

days before fading to green for the season. But the leaves are often just as lovely as the blooms.

"These woodland plants are just wonderful," Avery says. "It's a wonderful garden to have, especially in summer."

Here are seven great, easy-to-grow favorites that would be just as happy in an urban backyard as in my mother's sprawling garden. ☺

MAIDENHAIR FERN

(*Adiantum pedatum*)

This slow-growing, leafy fern will spread into a dense clump no more than two feet high. Plant it in moist, well-drained soil with lots of organic matter (think leaf-littered forest floor) under trees or in rock gardens or as a border. Anyday folks are an unlikely perennial and notes that it prefers timely rain. **Foliage only full to partial shade.**

CANADIAN WILD GINGER

(*Asarum canadense*)

A relative of European cultivated wild ginger will spread into a dense cover of fuzzy, heart-shaped leaves, not usually more than 10 inches tall. Around midsummer, the thicket conceals a secret flower—a brownish ground huggan orb and one of very few naturally occurring chocolate, faded blooms in the plant kingdom. Some recommend planting it under shrubs and trees and says it's uncommonly tolerant of dry shade. **Flowers in June and July full to partial shade.**

RED COLUMBINE

(*Apocynum canadense*)

The northeastern, long-flowering native columbine flowers blooming for much of the summer season. Crowned by thin, spiky lobes—if you bite the tops off—they're tiny, translucent sweet nectar. Even when it's not in bloom, the columbine's loosely sprays of leaflets add a fine filigree to shade gardens and grow well in tight spaces—between rocks, among tree roots or tucked into stone walls or undercroppings. **Flowers May through August, full shade to bright sun.**

MEADOW RUE

(*Thalictrum flavum* ssp. *speciosum*)

Though not all meadow rue is growing wild in Vermont and North American natives, this ethereal buttercup cousin is widely naturalized in our area. It grows in sun or shade with equal vigor, which makes it ideal for spots with variable light. Sometimes reaching heights of 10 feet or more (in sunny spots), meadow rue grows tall and quickly and shades surrounding plants. But wait! Crowded them out. Plant it in a gap and it'll fill the space within a few seasons. By late June, its gossamer clusters of showy white, purple or pink flowers capture a tiny fireworks. **Flowers in June and July, full shade to bright sun.**



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF HANNAH PALMER ROAN



GARDENING

BLUE BEAD LILY
(*Clintonia borealis*)

With waxy leaves and daisy yellow star shaped flowers in early spring this forest floor dweller produces sapphire-blue berries by autumn and Over time Clintonia spreads sprays of eering, almond shaped leaves and it will seed itself into a broken ground cover. It's not super showy but makes a nice understory for hedges, shrubs or bushes, and brings a lively splash of color as spring arrives. **Flowers in April and May, dappled and deciduous shade.**

BLOODROOT
(*Sanguinaria canadensis*)

Another harbinger of spring bloodroot makes a superb white ground cover. As soon as winter breaks, it shoots up an abundance of sample but showy white flowers, when these wither its deeply cleft, round leaves bring bulk and texture to corners, borders and bare patches. Take care when handling this plant, as it bleeds a deep, rusty hemlock color and will stain your hands and clothes. So strong is its bleed that Native Americans used it for dye. **Flowers in April and May, full to dappled shade.**

**RED TRILLIUM**
(*Trillium erectum*)

If you spend any time at all in the woods in early spring you're probably familiar with this nodding red flower which is truly a miracle of these three leaflets per leaf three green colored petals three sepals. But divided into three packs. At Chrysis Falls Avery carries red and white native varieties but worse they always sell out by early summer so if you'd like to get some go early in the wild trillium tends to be a single stalk plant but at the nursery Avery selects robust subsons that grow into clustered clumps up to 10 inches high. **Flowers in April and May, full to dappled shade.**



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Paint for the Uncrafty

Chalk paint is a quick and versatile DIY option

BY XIAN CHIANG-WAREN

As many an interior decorator will attest, a simple way to update your living space is to switch up the color of your furniture. A fresh coat of paint brings new life to an old table or cabinet; even a brightly hued small piece can transform a room.

The thing is, painting, staining, finishing and waiting for all those layers to dry can take all day or longer. That's not practical if you're updating the kitchen table or that throne you rely on after work. Plus, let's face it: Do-it-yourself projects are often better in theory than in practice. Rarely does something made at home look as gorgeous as the item you spotted on Pinterest.

I'm not the craftiest person, but, nearing the quarter-century mark, I'm due to get swept up in the DIY craze. Recently, I learned of a new decorating medium that's arrived in select Vermont stores: chalk paint. Developed by an artist in the U.K., Annie Sloan Chalk Paint is a line of colorful pigments, brushes and soft sponges with which even the unskilled can, reportedly, get lovely results.

The paint can be applied to wood, metal or plastic without using primer. Plus, free Chalk paint doesn't actually contain any chalk. The name refers to the matte, smooth finish, and possibly to the fact that a chalk-painted surface could be used as a chalkboard.

The Annie Sloan website and posts in the DIY blogosphere make the craft seem too good to be true. Want a sheer wash of color? Just add water to dilute the paint. Want a vintage look? The company sells a solution to produce a "crackled" effect, and its two options of finishing wax can be applied to create worn, glossy or varnished looks. Just



I FIGURED IF THIS NIFTY PAINT COULD TRANSFORM A RATTY, FADED-TURQUOISE WOODEN STAND, ANYTHING WAS POSSIBLE.

See applytochick.com

want clean, bold color? One coat of chalk paint, applied with a big, fluffy brush, should do the trick.

I was still dubious. Luckily, Annie Sloan only sells its products through small, independent businesses and requires at least one person at each store to be trained in using the paint. Once retailers have completed training, they can offer chalk-painting classes to the public. A handful of Vermont businesses (listed here) stock the Annie Sloan line and offer training.

To test chalk paint's cred

— and my own DIY prowess — I nabbed one of Karen Day's refurbed newspaper racks and headed to Burlington's Vintage Inspired Lifestyle Marketplace. There, owner Mary Henschel Allen walked me and a fellow student, 64-year-old Tom Centomorno of Colchester, through the process.

I figured if this nifty paint could transform a ratty, faded-turquoise wooden stand that had been languishing in a storage room for years, anything was possible.

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Paint for the Uncrafty with

The first thing we did was **prep our furniture** with a light sanding. Heinrich Allen noted that sanding isn't strictly necessary with Annie Sloan paints, but it never hurts.

Next, we **APPLIED THE FIRST LAYER OF**

PAINT I decided to paint the neck a bright Baracolor Orange. Countermarch, working on a dark blue antique chair that had belonged to his grandmother, was using a deep violet-gray shade called Graphite. His paint was dark enough to require only one layer.

Most light-on-light, dark-on-dark or dark-on-light combinations of chalk paint take just one coat and dry within minutes. However, I'd chosen a difficult color combination: I brushed on loads of Baracolor Orange, but still the turquoise peeked through and dulled the effect. Countermarch waited patiently while I added a second layer. Heinrich Allen standing at the ready with his hairdryer to speed up the process.

For more ambitious efforts, the painting stage offers a variety of options. The various colors in Annie Sloan's line are designed to be layered and blended over one another in complementary ways. The shades range from a sheer white (which is floating over unfinished wood) to bold, bright colors such as the one I chose. On weathered or worn furniture items, the paint settles into the cracks for an antique look.

Next came the **PAINTING STAGE**. Instead of using polyurethane to seal the paint, Annie Sloan offers a clear soft wax to finish and protect furniture. We cleaned our buffing brushes of paint and used them to spread on the wax—in the same direction as the wood grain—then wiped off the excess with lint-free cloths.

From here the waxing options are also varied. Heinrich Allen took some sandpaper to the edges of the neck, gently smoothing down areas that would naturally wear, allowing some of the turquoise to come through. You can also use the clear wax to create more texture on a surface. For yet another look, you can dab dark wax over the clear. I tried the last

option and got a brushed effect that brought out the warm tones in the Baracolor Orange.

Finally, to achieve a glossy finish we gently **WAXED** our pieces with clear, lint-free cloths. The full curing time for the wax is 20 days. Heinrich Allen told us, but you can still use your furniture within hours.

Saves enough, less than two hours after we'd begun our class. Countermarch and I headed home with our newly painted-up furniture. Maybe my wax job wasn't perfect, but I was sold on the versatility of chalk paint. Now I'm thinking of taking a brush to furniture I actually own. **D**

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